

Championing children in our inner cities

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Introduction: What Harrogate means for Conservatives

I am delighted to be here at the Hackney Community College.

Your mission statement talks of 'working in partnership, widening participation, raising standards and achievement, to meet the needs of the communities we serve'.

The hard work of students and staff here have made that statement a reality. Today I want to talk about how that reality can be spread to other inner city areas up and down the country.

Three months ago I visited Glasgow's Easterhouse estate.

This weekend I went back and spent some more time with the residents there who help their own neighbours.

A breakfast club run by church volunteers provides more than nourishment before school. One of the children who uses the club never knows if his mum or dad are even going to be at home.

But in a life where nothing else is reliable he does know that every morning the same person who provides him with breakfast will also listen to his worries and encourage him.

A positive role model has entered his life for the first time and has offered him the hope of escape from a life of deprivation.

Yet he is not a target that someone was asked to hit nor is he a statistic that will show up in an Annual Report.

He is just one child among many who someone took responsibility for and made a difference.

That is why at Harrogate I rededicated my party to look more deeply into the social challenges facing our country's most vulnerable communities and particularly the young in those communities.

How can we involve more fathers in the lives of their children?

How can we crack down on youth crime and the problems of drugs, to salvage young lives and to improve the communities they live in?

And most of all, how can we create schools that teach basic standards, and respect for themselves and for other people?

I remember when I finally decided I wanted to enter politics. I was on active service overseeing Rhodesia's transition to a democracy.

We visited a village after the guerrilla fighters had been brought in from the bush.

A little boy was digging a hole in the riverbed looking for water to wash in. His friends were laughing and playing nearby.

Their future was about to change for the better.

It struck me that these simple things that gave those children such pleasure had been impossible during the war.

Politicians gave them new opportunities, but twenty years later under a corrupt political process their country had slipped back into chaos.

To understand the power of politics, you also have to understand its limitations.

I entered politics to help make a difference, but that difference cannot be left in the hands of politicians alone.

I joined the Conservative Party precisely because it understands these things.

We have always worked to help people take back control of their own lives, we don't try and live their lives for them.

Because of that people too often think the Conservative Party only believes in money; that we are content for the most vulnerable in our society to sink or swim.

That must change. And under my leadership the Conservative Party is changing.

Learning from the voluntary sector

To truly help the vulnerable, we must learn the lessons from those who are already doing the most to help them.

They work in areas and with people who have been forgotten. Their local roots and independence allow them to get results that governments cannot even imagine.

Because of the depth of their personal commitment they have the authority to help people who want to change, they don't simply help people and hope they'll change.

You can call it 'tough love', but these groups are agents of change, not just another agency of the state.

And often as not they are provoked into action by the failure of the state.

I visited Faversham a couple of months ago and met two mothers who had set up a drug rehabilitation centre. One of them had turned her own son into the Police.

He had become a one-man crime wave, stealing from her and her neighbours and dealing to other children to feed his own addiction.

These two women had overcome the indifference of the police and the hostility of local officials to take control of their own situation.

How can politics help people like this without undermining what they do?

Voluntary groups want to be free to respond to the personal needs of local people rather than become enslaved by the artificial requirements of politicians.

This Government offered the voluntary sector a partnership, but that partnership has turned into a takeover.

Instead of forcing the voluntary sector to think and act like the state, politicians should have the humility to learn from what these groups do best.

They help the vulnerable with care, commitment and innovation, virtues which we must allow to flourish in our public services too.

The status quo

The way we organise our public services belongs to a bygone era.

In the 21st Century we are still running our public services and trying to make them accountable in the same ways we did after the Second World War.

But since then we have lived through the Cold War, the development of nuclear weapons and the information revolution, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rise of the internet.

Imagine what our living standards would be like today if we still ran our economy the way Clement Attlee did?

Now imagine how much better our quality of life could be if we no longer ran our public services the way Clement Attlee did.

At the beginning of a new century, no other major country runs their schools or their hospitals the way we do. That is why the quality of our public services is failing to keep pace with rising expectations and living standards.

For the past five years Labour has spent its time centralising our public services with targets and ten-year plans. It has drowned individual initiative in directives and dogma.

But central control is delivering neither fairness nor efficiency.

It is going to fall to the Conservatives to address these issues. We will have to re-examine the entire relationship between central government and the people it is supposed to represent.

We will have to challenge every principle except one: that people should be helped according to their needs.

We should challenge the idea that uniformity is more important than quality. That nobody minds receiving a poor service as long as nobody else is getting a better one.

But poor public services are not fair. They hit the vulnerable the hardest.

A Health Service in crisis affects the elderly disproportionately.

A society that turns a blind eye to violent crime and the drug culture condemns many council estates to fear and despair.

Bad schools keep poor families poor.

In some of our inner cities, as many as one in ten pupils leave schools without a single GCSE and truancy is rocketing. Compare this with places like Redbridge or Buckinghamshire where more than 90% of children gain five or more GCSEs.

As our country grows richer those who can, seek to buy their way out of failure, but they cannot avoid the consequences of failure for those who are left behind.

For generations too many experts have told us all it is unfair to expect children from inner cities to strive for the same standards as everybody else. I say it is unfair to expect anything less.

The most important thing to me personally, my mission for the Conservative Party, is to provide equal opportunity in our schools for all children - particularly the most vulnerable - wherever they live, however much their parents earn.

There is nothing compassionate about leaving the most vulnerable in our society to suffer simply because we decree that everybody should be treated the same regardless of their

needs.

Uniformity doesn't lead to social cohesion it only breeds social division.

When systems become more important than people and theory matters more than results, this country has lost its way.

Everywhere else around us services are tailored to our individual needs. We have more choice and more access to information, we are used to our views being taken seriously.

This is almost impossible in today's public services.

The effect on our political culture

The second thing we need to challenge is the idea that centralised politics and centralised public services are what hold our nation together.

In fact they are in danger of tearing it apart.

Take the case of Rose Addis, the 94 year old mother of my constituent, who was left unattended in her local Accident and Emergency ward.

All the family wanted was an apology. The hospital authorities dismissed their concerns. The family went to the press. The Health Secretary rubbished their story on national radio. The family came to me in despair and I raised the case in Prime Minister's Questions.

What followed was a 72-hour political row that dominated the national news. The entire political and NHS establishment came crashing down on Mrs Addis. She was even accused of being a racist all because she wanted a simple apology.

This one case encapsulates most of what is wrong with the post-War welfare state.

A vulnerable lady did not get the quality of care she deserved. The hospital was too rigid even to offer an apology.

The lines of political accountability were so centralised that the Health Secretary, the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister became involved to try and resolve a single case.

Ultimately this degree of centralisation diminishes our democracy.

Because Central Government is responsible for everything, it tries to run everything, and because it tries to run everything it ends up running most things badly.

So it relies on spin to pretend that things are better than they are.

Detailed target setting, leads to failure, this leads to lies and the setting of new detailed targets. The vicious circle is complete.

As a result our political culture becomes debased and our public services become demoralised.

People are crying out to be heard. They want to have a say in the direction their communities take, they want more control over their own lives.

We must listen to them and we must learn to trust them by placing responsibility for results back where it belongs.

Towards a new settlement

Better schools and hospitals, more responsive local government, means giving teachers,

doctors, nurses and councillors the power to do their jobs and making them accountable for what they do.

That is what happens in every other walk of life, it is also what happens in every other country whose standards of public services exceed our own.

Rudolph Giuliani turned crime around in New York because he had the authority to do so, because that is what the voters elected him as Mayor to do, and because he knew that that was how he would ultimately be judged.

In Stockholm, the county government introduced a choice of family doctor and a choice of hospital for its citizens because Sweden gives different parts of the country the right to run healthcare differently.

In Holland it takes as few as 50 parents to set up a new independent school, where the Government pays for children to be taught within a slimmed down national curriculum.

Trusting people is the modern way, followed by countries across the world including those who are considered more egalitarian than Britain.

What all these nations have in common is that they have put quality before uniformity, people before ideology. It is time for us to do the same.

What might a new settlement look like?

Conservatives are rightly suspicious of blueprints. It is that kind of approach that has taken so much power away from people in the past.

The Government's plans for regional assemblies will not drive power down from Whitehall they will strip power from local communities. They mean more centralisation, not less.

And yet I have been struck by the diversity of solutions on offer as I and my Shadow Cabinet colleagues have travelled around Britain and Europe.

Kent County Council is running a scheme it has initiated with the Treasury, where it is taking responsibility for getting people off welfare and back into work in return for a share of the benefit savings.

We need to look at our benefit system as a whole. The entire impetus for welfare reform in the United States came from individual states and cities taking charge of welfare programmes from the Federal Government.

People say that Britain is too small to have the laboratories of democracy that the United States has. But it isn't a question of size, it is a matter of identity. Switzerland is a very small country. Yet it retains a vibrant and vital local tradition through its cantons.

People who want a European superstate say that Britain is too small to be a country. With the fourth largest economy in the world, British people are entitled to treat this with derision.

There will be areas where we want to decentralise directly to people who receive services and other areas where we want to make services more locally accountable. The two need not be incompatible.

In the end if you want to spread best practice, you have to be prepared to allow best practice by encouraging people to do different things in different places in order to learn what works.

Conclusion

Parties say they want to decentralise in Opposition, but too often they change their tune in

Government. The present administration is more guilty of this than nearly all of its predecessors.

That is because the way we conduct politics in this country has remained unchanged for more than fifty years. The buck always stops with central government.

But central government is not delivering the goods any more, nor are nationalised, uniform public services. People in this country know that and we have to be honest enough to say it.

Our nation is the natural level of allegiance, that is why we believe that control over our armed forces and the power to control our economy.

But that does not mean the most appropriate level for organising and holding to account every last public service is national.

If we are to strengthen our nation and our society we have to learn from the modern world and recognise that it is organisations operating on a human scale that succeed.

The way to revive our politics, the way to improve our schools and hospitals, the way to make our streets safer is to trust the people who can really make a difference.

It is not just about helping people and hoping they will change; it is about helping people who want to change.

It is about supporting people who are trying to assert some control over their own lives, seeking help because they want a better life for themselves and their families.

Education is the key to that opportunity.

We want future generations to believe in our laws, we want them to contribute to our prosperity and to play their full part in our country's future.

But they need something from us: a passion and a commitment to equal opportunity in our schools for all our children.

The path back to a stronger, more decent society begins in the classroom. It begins in places like this.

In your example lies our nation's future.